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ATTACK ON THE USS LIBERTY
REALPOLITIK GONE HAYWIRE

by

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Abstract

On June 8th, 1967, in the midst of the Six-Day War, the state of Israel attacked and nearly sunk the USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5) while LIBERTY was patrolling north of the Sinai Peninsula. The U.S. reaction to the attack was to accept the Israeli explanation without really believing it, and to avoid a confrontation with the only democracy in the Middle East.

This research paper uses a case study methodology to delve into the details of the attack and the foreign policy considerations surrounding it. The research shows that significant U.S. options were ignored in the reaction to the attack of the LIBERTY. The result has been a huge injustice to the men of the LIBERTY, who continue to struggle to make their case known. It is probable that only a full congressional inquiry into this incident will resolve the questions surrounding the attack of the LIBERTY.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, there is a need for follow-on research regarding the structure of the various Israeli explanations of the attack compared with the availability of U.S. public data regarding the incident. The hypothesis would be that Israeli explanations of the attack were more likely to change to accommodate and include new information on the incident, as it became available in the U.S. The purpose of the follow-on project would be to determine if explanations were created to explain the incident as accidental, yet still include enough real details to retain semblance of credibility. It would be expected that a positive correlation of explanations to timing of

new public information regarding the LIBERTY would help confirm the hypothesis and show a deception and disinformation effort to obscure the facts surrounding the attack on the LIBERTY.

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides; Who covers faults, at last shame them derides.

--Shakespeare
King Lear, Act I, Scene I, Line 282
1605-1606

Administration after administration wrestle with the sundering discordant forces latent within the Middle East since Israel became a state in 1948 in the attempt to bring stability to this region of vital strategic interest. The region flared up again in 1967 with the Third Arab-Israeli War, the so-called Six-Day War, in which Israel inflicted tremendous losses on its Arab opponents, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. However, the Arabs were not the only nations to suffer during the six days from June 5th-10th, 1967. On June 8th, at a critical juncture in the fighting, the USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5) was subjected to a coordinated air and naval attack that ended the ship's mission, killed 34, wounded 171, and nearly sunk the ship. In the aftermath, the Israeli government attributed the attack to a tragic mistake, and the United States, although rejecting the Israeli version of events, agreed to drop the issue, and actively worked to hide the truth of the incident.¹ The fundamental decision not to protect the LIBERTY, not to fully investigate the attack, and to hide the truth of the attack was a tremendous foreign policy error, and denied justice to the crewman.

Tripartite Declaration

The post World War II policies of the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations attempted to balance U.S. interests throughout the region, realizing that relations with both Arab and Israeli nations were important. Significantly, although the U.S. immediately recognized Israel upon declaration of statehood, U.S. interests also included relations with key Middle Eastern states that countered Soviet influence and provided critical oil to Europe and Japan. The Tripartite Declaration by the United States, France, and Britain on May 25, 1950 provided a means to preserve the balance and to prevent an arms race in the Middle East.² Practically, this meant the powers "pledged themselves to ration the supply of arms to the Arab countries and Israel so as to prevent the development of an arms race and the creation of an 'imbalance' between the antagonists, and also made themselves the guarantors of the armistice borders against any attempt to alter them by force."³

This period was not only marked by an attempt to limit arms sales and proliferation in the Middle East. U.S. presidents also clearly distinguished between U.S. and Israeli interests. For instance, President Kennedy met with Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir in December 1962 to stress that while the U.S. in many cases favored Israel, the U.S. would be a more effective advocate if the U.S. were not to lose its influence with the other nations in the region. Kennedy, knowing the security issue was most important to any Israeli government, compared U.S. security problems with the Soviet Union (the Cuban Missile Crisis was the most recent) with the security dangers of Israel, and urged reconsideration of disproportionate force against the countries that sponsored raiders.

Kennedy pointed out that large-scale retaliation affected U.S. interests and stated that “Our relationship is a two way street.”⁴

However, during the Six-Day War a series of factors led to a decision to forget about the two-way street. These factors set in motion a series of decisions that ultimately put the attack on USS LIBERTY out of the public’s attention, remaining hidden until the LIBERTY Veterans Association was able to resurrect the issue a dozen years later. The most important of these was the interdependence of U.S. administration and Israeli interests in 1967, but this interdependence needs some explaining. The issues regarding Israel were and remain complex: Israel’s borders were insecure in the face of an enemy bent on Israeli destruction, at least 1 million refugees plagued Israel and her neighbors, and the refugee problem provided opportunities to exacerbate tensions. Water rights with the Jordan River provided a source of conflict. Some Arab nations wanted to see the death of the state of Israel, while others had territorial ambitions. Arabs that thought of making peace with Israel were assassinated.⁵ And the Egyptian reaction to the U.S. led Baghdad Pact initiative in 1955 gave the Soviets a way to gain influence in the Middle East where they previously had none.⁶

The introduction of the Soviets to the equation in the Middle East proved most unsettling for the United States and undermined the efforts of the Tripartite Declaration. John Foster Dulles, in negotiating the Baghdad Pact had intended to ring in the Soviet underbelly, but in doing so managed to inflame Iraqi-Egyptian rivalry. The Soviet Union, who would provide all the armaments Egypt could want at reasonably cheap prices, exploited Egypt’s dissatisfaction. This worked counter to Western aims of balancing power and limiting arms buildups in the Middle East. It also ended up

ensuring Israel would need additional force with which to defend herself. As Soviet support for Arab countries grew, an arms race shattering the arms control aspect of the Tripartite Declaration between Israel and the Arab nations set the stage for a proxy Soviet-Western military confrontation in the Middle East. Supporting Israel became a primary way to contain Soviet Middle Eastern ambitions. Crisis de-escalation was how the U.S. sought to keep outside powers from participating in Middle East conflict, preventing a third world war. These factors gained special significance during the Six-Day War. By June 10th Israel had taken the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, expanding its territory and decreasing its border lengths.⁷

However, in the calculus of the Six-Day War, embarrassment of the Soviet Union (suppliers of Middle Eastern Arab armies), destruction of Soviet supplied equipment, discredit of Nasser, and Israeli territorial gains became more prominent and important than oil, choke points, arms limitations, economic, or other U.S. interests – including the protection of unarmed U.S. Navy ships operating in international waters near war zones.⁸ The problem is relevant today because U.S. strategy core objectives are to enhance U.S. security, bolster economic prosperity, and promote democracy abroad. Bolstering prosperity and democracy promotion both entail engagement with other nations wherever possible.⁹ While this strategy integrates economic and political instruments of power, it also provides the military prerequisites for the repeat of the circumstances leading up to another LIBERTY incident. That is, U.S. military forces could be deployed in a war or conflict zone that includes a nation with significant interdependent interests. The problem for the military commander at the operational and tactical levels will be to understand the factors that affect U.S. strategic, operational, and tactical response

options. The USS LIBERTY provides a good window for observing these considerations and ample lessons in poor policy response.

Prelude to the Six-Day War

In 1956 Israel had soundly beaten Egypt, yet Israel was forced to give up territory, continued to face unceasing Arab hostility, and remained in a precarious security position that could not improve with time. Outnumbered and outgunned, Israel had superior technological, operational, and tactical innovation to counter an ineffective Arab foe. Yet for Israel the future had to look very uncertain, since Arab ineffectiveness could eventually be overcome. The only serious peace initiative with an Arab country had ended in 1951 with the assassination of the King of Jordan, the Arab nations as a whole were bent on seeing Israel's destruction (some more so than others), and the Soviet Union was supplying the armaments to these countries. Terrorist acts constantly originated from border countries, especially Syria, in an effort to take a toll on Israel.¹⁰ Although the Arab nations did not have effective armies right then, to the Israeli point of view it could not have been a comforting thought that the Arabs might some day get better. The Israelis needed to improve their strategic security, and knew that the "flood" of Soviet weapons represented a terrible threat. Thus, when throughout the last half of 1966 Israel suffered under increasingly virulent terrorist attacks mostly emanating from Syria the stage was set for more serious responses. The added danger of the November 1966 defense agreement between Syria and Egypt (United Arab Republic) provided for a joint military command.¹¹ An effective joint command could eventually devastate Israel's survival. The existence of these conditions was intolerable to Israel's survival interest, and not surprisingly, Israel needed a strategy with which to handle these threats.

Israeli Strategy

Essentially the more militant Israelis in government advocated a two-fold strategy that provided for defense of the state, but also contained an important offensive capability. Border clashes would be used to create tension in preparation for delivery of the “crushing blow”. In such an environment Israel knew another war was inevitable (starting about 1965), and that there was no chance that Israel would lose.¹²

The Israeli policy to respond disproportionately to state sponsored terrorism provided the means to increase border tensions and may have precipitated the spring 1967 crisis. On November 13th, 1966 Israel responded to 13 acts of sabotage from Jordanian bases by bombing Es Samu, Jordan, killing 18 Jordanian soldiers and civilians and wounding 54. The bombing was widely seen as disproportionate to the acts of sabotage precipitating the response. The U.N. Security Council roundly condemned the action with a 14-0 vote (1 abstention, New Zealand).¹³ However, the bombing was rather minor compared to the Israeli-Syrian confrontation on 07 April 1967. In this event “An exchange of fire between tanks gave rise to intervention first by Israeli and then by Syrian aircraft. This led by the end of the day to the appearance of Israeli planes over the outskirts of Damascus and to the shooting down of six Syrian planes.”¹⁴ The Arab community was in a firestorm because one of the purposes of the United Arab Republic was to coordinate military matters relating to Israel. However, during these incidents the leader of the United Arab Republic, President Nasser, was ineffectual in coordinating any response. The stage was set for Nasser to take action, so that he could preserve some semblance of leadership in the Arab community.¹⁵

Nasser Tries to Save Face

In mid-May, the Arabs thought Israel had a plan to sneak attack Syria, and then Egypt. The plan was apparently discovered by Soviet intelligence, although the accuracy of the intelligence was the subject of much skepticism and is a question that remains. Certainly the Israeli security situation was precarious enough to demand campaign planning in the face of Arab hostility. The Israelis pointed out that there were no signs of a sneak attack pending, since Israel did not concentrate forces on any of the borders.¹⁶ However, Israel later showed it really did not need to telegraph an attack by concentrating forces on a border long before an attack in its execution of the taking of the Golan Heights late on June 9th and 10th. In this instance the Israelis were able to mass on June 8th, the same day USS LIBERTY was attacked.¹⁷ Regardless of whether or not there was a plan by Israel to conduct a sneak attack at the end of May timeframe, this information did spur Nasser into action. He called up armored forces and placed them in the Sinai on May 16th. By May 17th Nasser's forces positioned themselves beyond the UNEF (United Nations Emergency Force) contingent on the Egyptian-Israeli border. In effect, the UNEF could no longer do their job, and if hostilities had started, would have quickly become battlefield casualties.¹⁸

The UNEF had been positioned in Egypt since the 1956 war, but Israel had never consented to UNEF stationing on the Israeli side of the border.¹⁹ During the movement of Egyptian forces to positions along the border, the Egyptian commanding general asked the UNEF to leave. This request eventually was elevated to a Nasser request to U.N. Secretary General U Thant for removal of the UNEF. Having no other choice, U Thant agreed and pulled the UNEF out by 16 May. Egypt now rattled its sword. Nasser pulled out the same arguments from 1956 and renewed them at the end of May. The final straw

was the threat to close the Strait of Tiran, which would have prevented shipping reaching Eilat, the Israeli port at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba.²⁰

Nasser had made himself clear. The Israelis knew there would be war, just not who would be with them. They also knew that they had the better capability and would win, and that they would have to conclude fighting quickly to prevent escalation of the conflict to beyond the Middle East powers.²¹ They also saw the opportunity to correct the strategic security imbalance by seizing territory. Territory had the dual purpose of making borders more secure and potentially providing bargaining position to negotiate with Israel's neighbors.²² Keeping seized territory would depend on the circumstances of the fighting and Israel's security interests.²³

The Superpowers and Israel

The superpower relations with Israel greatly affected these calculations. U.S. official policy was to support territorial integrity of all the Middle Eastern nations, meaning no territorial expansion for Israel as the result of Israeli aggression.²⁴ The U.S. intelligence estimates assessed that Israel would be able to defeat her Arab neighbors in about one week.²⁵ Israeli Foreign Minister Eban traveled to the U.S., Britain, and France during the last week in May 1967, to find out how these powers viewed the crisis and what support they would give. None was willing to employ force to reopen the Strait of Tiran, despite some Senate calls for deployment of Navy forces, and President Johnson reportedly pointedly told Eban that the U.S. would not support Israeli aggression.²⁶ This was not to say the U.S. would have nothing to gain from a quick victory. On the contrary, the U.S. could hope for a decrease in Soviet prestige and destruction of Soviet-supplied equipment

if the Israelis were able to perform as anticipated. This would help overcome the gains the Soviets had made in the years since 1955.

The Arab-Israel conflict was a tremendous opportunity for the Soviet Union to further its interests in the Middle East. By providing arms to Arab countries the Soviets were able to curry favor and undermine western influence, especially by creating an arms imbalance between Arab countries and Israel. The hope for the Soviet Union was "to further its new policy of trying to supplant the traditional Western role in the Middle East and to outflank NATO."²⁷ Syria was key in this role for the Soviets, for Syria offered the most promise for penetration. Indeed, the Syrians benefited from the Soviet veto in the U.N. Security Council anytime a resolution criticizing Syria arose.²⁸ However, Syrian tolerance of Al Fatah raids to Israel had created a precarious position. The year-old Syrian government, long-lived for those days, could have faced a serious stability problem if Israel were to conduct an offensive against Syria in retaliation for allowing the raids. Soviet intelligence reporting of an impending Israeli attack on Syria in mid-May proved particularly disconcerting, because the USSR did not want to see Syria "humiliated, defeated and perhaps overthrown."²⁹ Soviet concern may have gone so far as to place expert personnel with Syrian artillery on the Golan Heights.³⁰ So, the Soviets, in countering a threat to Syria, may have encouraged Nasser into action that ultimately proved worse than Israeli retaliation against Syria would have been.³¹ Hence, instead of "the collapse of Western influence, the consolidation of Russian influence in the revolutionary Arab states, and its extension to the remaining Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa,"³² the Soviets got the Six-Day War.

The question of who started the war was critical to what sort of end-state would be achieved. The U.N. Charter states that no state shall profit by taking the territory of another,³³ but the consequences of such a policy in the Middle Eastern context are devastating. Effectively, the United Nations Charter, strictly interpreted, granted the Arab nations a territorial blank check to fight any war it wished, never having to risk any of its own territories with its aggression, knowing that at the end of it all, even if they lost, they would have their land returned. Practically though, the Charter really made no such guarantee. So, if the Arabs started the war then there would be less of a mandate for Israel to return captured territories, providing more room for the Israelis to enhance border security and leverage to induce independent negotiations with Arab states. If Israel was the aggressor then she would face great pressure to return captured territories without condition.

Notes

¹ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979) 206.

² Theodore Draper, *Israel and World Politics: Roots of the Third Arab-Israeli War*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), 16-17.

³ Nadav Safran, "The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 361.

⁴ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 181-182.

⁵ Nadav Safran, "The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 328. King Abdullah of Jordan and Israeli representatives met during the winter of 1949 and would have settled the West Bank boundary problems, and the refugee issue. The deal gave Jordan the West Bank territories, refugee compensation money, and port rights at Haifa, Israel. The plan faced significant opposition in Jordan, and the Prime Minister would never sign. King Abdullah was assassinated in July, 1951.

⁶ Nadav Safran, "The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 361-362.

⁷ CAPT W. J. Kotsch, "The Six-Day War of 1967," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, June 1968, 77.

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⁸ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 199.

⁹ *National Security Strategy for a New Century*, (October 1998), 1,6,8-9,12,27-28.

¹⁰ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 304-320.

¹¹ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 304-305.

¹² Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 189-193.

¹³ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 305.

¹⁴ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 306.

¹⁵ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 306.

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, "The Consequences of Defeat," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 322-323.

¹⁷ Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 180-191.

¹⁸ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 311-312.

¹⁹ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 313; Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 196-197.

²⁰ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 311-312.

²¹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 193.

²² Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 199.

²³ Harry N. Howard, "The U.S. in the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967), 338-340, 366-367.

²⁴ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 198; Harry N. Howard, "The U.S. in the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967), 339-340. The U.K. position was more stern. "Foreign Secretary Brown...said precisely what he meant by the principle of support for 'political independence and territorial integrity,' which had 'a direct bearing on the question of withdrawal' of Israeli forces from occupied areas. There were 'no two ways' about withdrawal, according to Brown, since it followed 'from the words in the Charter that war should not lead to territorial aggrandizement.'"

²⁵ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 200.

²⁶ Harry N. Howard, "The U.S. in the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967), 339; *New York Times*, 24 May, 1967, 16:4.

²⁷ Edgar O'Balance, *The Third Arab-Israeli War*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972), 16.

²⁸ Bernard Lewis, "The Consequences of Defeat," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 322.

²⁹ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 310.

³⁰ Bernard Lewis, "The Consequences of Defeat," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 322.

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³¹ Charles W. Yost, "How It Began," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 310.

³² Bernard Lewis, "The Consequences of Defeat," *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 324.

³³ Harry N. Howard, "The U.S. in the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967), 340. Supra note 21.

Chapter 2

The Attack on the USS LIBERTY

Let us contemplate our forefathers, and posterity, and resolve to maintain the rights bequeathed to us from the former, for the sake of the latter. The necessity of the times, more than ever, calls for our utmost circumspection, deliberation, fortitude and perseverance. Let us remember that "if we suffer tamely a lawless attack upon our liberty, we encourage it, and involve others in our doom." It is a very serious consideration . . . that millions yet unborn may be the miserable sharers of the event.

Samuel Adams
Speech [1771]

Movement to Theater, Mission

One of the decisions in the tense period leading to the Six-Day War was to move USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5) from her mission along West Africa to the Mediterranean. USS LIBERTY had started the deployment from Norfolk, VA on May 2, 1967, and was to conduct its patrol off the West African coast.¹ However, the change came on the 24th of May, while the ship was making a port visit in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. USS LIBERTY was to make best speed to Rota, Spain, where she would briefly resupply, and then transit to her patrol station north of the Sinai Peninsula and west of the Gaza strip, in international waters. The LIBERTY's top speed was about 17 knots, so the transit to Rota would take eight days.² Upon arriving in port on June 1st, LIBERTY took on "380,000 gallons of fuel, miscellaneous stores, and vitally needed parts,"³ but was

delayed leaving until June 2nd while the tender USS CANOPUS (AS-34) effected repairs to the hydraulic system of the TRSSCOM.⁴

Although called a technical research ship, the USS LIBERTY was an intelligence collection ship.⁵ The ship itself was a converted Victory class merchant that had been modified for naval service. The total defensive capability on the ship was four .50-caliber machine guns. She had been redirected from Western Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean so that she could monitor the situation in the crisis area.

The specific patrol assignment was made by a committee that included naval officers with experience as crew members performing USS LIBERTY's mission in sister ships, and with Department of Defense representatives interested in the information the LIBERTY could provide. The technical research ship scheduling office was at this meeting. In the first of a series of events that could have prevented this tragedy from occurring, the committee consensus was to recommend LIBERTY reposition to the eastern Mediterranean. The dissenting voice in the debate to move the ship had to leave in the middle of the meeting, and so was not present to affect the final recommendation for where LIBERTY should patrol.⁶ The LIBERTY spent from June 2nd until June 7th transiting the Mediterranean, and arrived at her assigned patrol station on the morning of June 8th. USS LIBERTY was to patrol in a three-segment dogleg, roughly paralleling the coastline in international waters. The easternmost point of approach was 13NM from the Gaza strip, while the westernmost segment was approximately 90NM to the west, north of Port Said, Egypt.⁷

Attempted Reassignment

Even before USS LIBERTY got to the Gaza, there was continued debate on the merit of placing her in a war zone. On the ship, on June 5th, the day the war started, Captain McGonagle asked the Commander, 6th Fleet, Vice Admiral Martin, for a destroyer escort to remain within 5NM of LIBERTY. However, on June 6th VADM Martin denied the request, citing the flag and U.S. neutrality as sufficient to deter an attack.⁸ In a routine staff review in Washington, D.C., it was decided that USS LIBERTY's presence was not required any closer than 20NM from the UAR (United Arab Republic) coast. An order was sent during the D.C. commuting hour on the 7th of June, the day before the attack (approximately midnight LIBERTY time), but the message was misrouted and never did get to the ship.⁹



Figure 1 USS LIBERTY before the attack (stern view).¹⁰

Then a more urgent attempt was made to move the LIBERTY. The USDAO in Tel Aviv apparently sent a message warning that USS LIBERTY would be attacked if the ship patrolled off the Gaza.¹¹ The timing of this threat apparently came following a turn by the ship toward the Levant from south of Cyprus, detected by Israeli maritime reconnaissance.¹² The JCS quickly reacted to the threat by calling the CINCUSNAVEUR (Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe) duty officer at about 0200B (USS LIBERTY time), ordering the LIBERTY moved 100NM off shore. The duty officer demanded a hard copy message, which was sent at 080110Z (080310B). Unfortunately, the computer system that misrouted the first message misrouted this one also. Unfortunately, although CINCUSNAVEUR teletyped the order to COMSIXTHFLT, COMSIXTHFLT did not call the ship on a voice circuit to relay the change, instead relying on hard copy message traffic to forward the tasking. This message was misrouted, and not delivered to the USS LIBERTY before the attack began. Still another message, a Top Secret message, was sent from JCS to USS LIBERTY, information to the chain of command, directing the movement 100NM from the coast, but was sent on a circuit the LIBERTY could not receive.¹³

The Captain of the LIBERTY, Captain William L. McGonagle, also was nervous about the patrol assignment. He called LCDR David Lewis, the head of the technical research department, to assess the affect of moving the ship further off shore.

He asked Lewis how the mission would be affected if the ship stayed fifty miles from Gaza. 'It would hurt us, Captain,' Lewis replied. 'We want to work in the UHF (ultra-high-frequency) range. That's mostly line-of-sight stuff. If we're over the horizon we might as well be back in Abidjan. It would degrade our mission by about eighty percent.' McGonagle considered this and then said 'Okay, we'll go all the way in.'¹⁴

Cat and Mouse

LIBERTY continued toward her previously assigned patrol mission. The night of June 7th was uneventful, with the exception of a ‘game’ that LIBERTY crewman ‘played’ with Israeli aircraft at about 2200B. During this episode, LIBERTY technicians reportedly manipulated LIBERTY’s radar return as it would appear to the Israeli aircraft. The LIBERTY used electronic counter-measures to alter the return generated by the locked-on fire-control radar in the aircraft.¹⁵ There was no further interaction with Israeli Defense Forces until early the next morning, when the first of at least eight pre-attack reconnaissance flights occurred at 0515B, as the ship was heading southeast toward the first point in its patrol dogleg. The reconnaissance aircraft was probably a French-built Nord 2501 Noratlas cargo aircraft performing a reconnaissance mission.¹⁶

Israeli Reconnaissance

Aircraft did not return to the LIBERTY again until just before 0900B. This was a distant jet for which no markings were distinguishable. By 1000B two French-built Mirage III delta-wing jet fighter-bombers flew close by the ship, making three passes. The aircraft were close enough that bridge personnel could count the ordnance under the wings, but the aircraft were not marked. The pilots were visible to bridge watchstanders through binoculars. “LIBERTY’s radio operators overheard one of the pilots reporting back to his base that the ship was American and that he could see the flag.”¹⁷

After two visits from jet aircraft, LIBERTY was next surveilled again by another Noratlas, this time at about 1030B. The aircraft made three very low passes close aboard, so much so that the decks of the ship vibrated with the noise of the aircraft engines. A Star of David marking was visible on the Noratlas. The same or an identical Noratlas

returned again at 1100B, circled the ship, and made one pass over top at low altitude. At 1130B another Noratlas repeated the reconnaissance, circling and then passing over the ship. Yet again at 1215B, and then at 1245B Noratlas aircraft returned to the ship, circled, but did not pass over. Noratlas aircraft had visited the LIBERTY four times between 1030B and 1245B.¹⁸

In the minutes leading up to the attack the radar picture grew confusing:

At 1358[B] the radar operators reported three surface boats approaching the ship from astern, moving very rapidly at an estimated 30 knots. At the same time, the radarmen spotted three aircraft coming from the same direction, about 16 miles away and expected to arrive in two minutes.

Ennes and the other officers on the bridge watched the skies for the approaching aircraft, expecting another now-familiar aerial observation. Instead, the planes flew past the ship on the starboard side, made 180-degree turns, and flew directly over the ship, one following another. Suddenly there were there were (sic) loud explosions and flames on bridge and deck. The ship was under attack.¹⁹

Air Attack

Mirage III's with no national markings carried out the initial air attack, and were later joined by Mystere IV's.²⁰ The first targets of the aircraft fire were the four .50 caliber Browning machine gun mounts, and the ships topside antennae complex. The Mirage III's were equipped with a 30mm cannon and 36 rockets, and the Mystere IV's were equipped with two 30mm guns, 55 rockets, and napalm. The combination served to damage or destroy the ships capability to collect, send, or receive radio transmissions within the first minutes of the attack. The radar and ships gyro compass were 'shot away', and the ships interior communications circuits were incapacitated. Even the sound-powered phone circuits sustained damage.

The Israeli tactics were simple but effective. The jets would approach the ship heading toward the bow, first firing rockets into the superstructure. As the aircraft flew overhead they would drop napalm on the ship. Not only did the napalm burn the electronics and gun mounts topside, but the burning petroleum jelly would also penetrate through the numerous rocket and gun holes in the ship, providing an incendiary effect within the skin of the ship. The aircraft repeated the attacks once every 45 seconds. Because the ship was a converted Victory class merchant the

LIBERTY had no armor, and the armor-piercing shells designed for desert warfare against tanks would sometimes go through several decks to finally explode in the lower decks of the ship. At the same time, the Mysteres dropped their napalm canisters, which ‘burst into flame upon impact...the jellied slop burned furiously and surged through the shell holes to burn below.’²¹

In all the LIBERTY sustained 821 major rocket and shell holes during the air attack (holes at least the size of a fist), and 164 of these were in the vicinity of the bridge. At least a dozen aircraft consummated the assault.

While the air assault was proceeding, three Israeli motor torpedo boats were heading from their base at Ashdod, Israel to the LIBERTY’s area. Before the air attack started, “crewmembers of the LIBERTY had intercepted radio transmissions between the Israeli jets, the motor torpedo boats from Ashdod, and their bases. The intercepted conversations referred to the LIBERTY as an American ship.”²²

USS LIBERTY Radio Circuits Jammed

During the 25-minute air attack the aircraft took no chances that the ship would radio for help. Five of the six LIBERTY ship-shore radio circuits were jammed (buzz-saw noise) from the start of the attack at 1403B through the finish, with only brief respites during the rocket firings. Significantly,

Radioman Richard Sturman discussed this jamming of the radios in an interview with author [John Borne], New York, July 18, 1993. He said that it takes some time to find the frequency on which a source (such as the Liberty) is broadcasting. The planes could not have found the five frequencies of the ship in the few minutes when the attack began, so logically this search must have been made by shore-based Israeli radio installations before the attack.

Also, there is an 'international distress frequency' which is known to seamen worldwide and is never interfered with so that ships in distress can send out SOS signals. This too was jammed by the planes.²³

With nearly every antennae and much of the radio equipment damaged, the ship's radiomen had to patch together a system to transmit an emergency message. When they did get a circuit up, they discovered the jamming stopped for the few seconds surrounding rocket attacks. Those few seconds provided the ship the opportunity to contact USS SARATOGA (CV-60) at 1409B.²⁴

Motor Torpedo Boat Attack

The air attack continued until about 1425B, when the aircraft departed, but the attack was taken up by the torpedo boats. The boats approached in a high-speed attack V formation, and signaled something unintelligible. LIBERTY's signal lights were damaged from the air attack, Captain McGonagle's handheld light was unable to penetrate the smoke surrounding the bridge from all the fires that still raged, an unmanned after-gun mount was 'cooking' off .50 caliber fire wildly, and a forward gunner could not hear the Captain's shouts to cease fire before an ineffectual burst was sent in the direction of the torpedo boats. The ship's interior communications and some of the sound-powered phone circuits were damaged in the air attack. The boats approached to within 300 yards and launched between three and five torpedoes, one of which hit the ship amidships on the starboard side.²⁵

Although two to four torpedoes missed their mark, the torpedo that struck the ship could not have been better placed. The compartment hit held the technical research department, which due to its sensitive nature had restricted access. There was only one way in or out of what was the Number three hold immediately forward of the machinery spaces.²⁶ 25 men died as the result of the hit, and the rest of the men had to clamber in the dark and with rising waters to the single entry-exit point of the technical research spaces. The torpedo had torn a 40-foot hole in the side of the ship, and if not for the damage control efforts of the crew, likely would have sunk the LIBERTY. As it was, the ship acquired a 9-degree list to starboard.²⁷ The torpedo had struck at 1435B.²⁸

The concussion of the torpedo's explosion knocked open the main circuit breakers in the engine room, and all power was lost. The air attacks had knocked out the emergency diesel generator. The Liberty was dead in the water. Below decks, scores of men in damage control parties worked in a stifling darkness to establish flooding boundaries, shore up weakened decks and bulkheads, plug holes and cracks, and assist a new parade of bloodied men with broken bones, collapsed lungs, and blown-out ear membranes to the dressing stations on the upper decks. And in the engine room machinist's mates and boilermen labored by flashlight to make their plant come alive again.²⁹

In addition to torpedoes, the boats were equipped with 20mm and 40mm guns. After firing the torpedoes, the boats circled the LIBERTY, firing the guns at the ship's waterline and at personnel moving abovedecks. The torpedo boats had closed range to 100 feet, and kept firing at the ship until 1515B, when the torpedo boats moved off. With the ship listing, heavily damaged and no power, Captain McGonagle gave the order to prepare to abandon ship. Most of the life rafts had been destroyed in the air attack and resultant fires, but crewmen did manage to find 3 life rafts that were still usable. However, when the life rafts were placed in the water a torpedo boat approached the ship and machine-gunned two of them. The torpedo boat gunfire cut the third raft's line

attaching it to the ship, setting the life raft adrift. The torpedo boat recovered the life raft, and then all three motor torpedo boats headed back toward Ashdod.³⁰ Coincidentally,

Something else had happened at 3:05 P.M. ship time [1505B], just before the Israeli MTB's departed. COMSIXTHFLT had sent the following message via plain-language radio:

Your flash traffic received. Sending aircraft to cover you. Surface units are on the way. Keep [situation reports] coming.³¹



Figure 2 The very top of the torpedo hole.³²

As the torpedo boats withdrew toward Ashdod, two Israeli French-built Aerospatiale SA-321 Super Frelon assault helicopters approached the ship. Each helicopter had one gunner, and each was full of armed troops. The aircraft hovered near the ship, then approached closer, hovering over bow and stern. The helicopters were clearly marked with the Star of David, and bore side numbers H4 and H8. The helicopters were designed to hold thirty armed troops, and were capable of amphibious operations using its boat-

type hull and stabilizing fins by the rear landing gear. After a few minutes hovering the helicopters departed.³³

Rescue Flights

U.S. Navy response to the attack proved to be an enigma. The first time the LIBERTY was able to send a message alerting U.S. forces of the attack was at 1409B. At this point the USS SARATOGA, which received the message, was 400 miles to the west. The commanding officer of SARATOGA immediately ordered the launch of aircraft; 15 minutes later at 1424B twelve aircraft were airborne. A minute later, Rear Admiral Geis, Commander Task Force 60 (commanding the task force consisting of the SARATOGA and USS AMERICA (CV-66) battle groups in the Mediterranean,) ordered the SARATOGA flight recalled. Then either COMSIXTHFLT or CTF 60, it isn't clear which, ordered a rescue flight be sent in 90 minutes, or at approximately 1550B. At 1550B both carriers launched aircraft, but again Rear Admiral Geis ordered the aircraft recalled.³⁴

The first rescue flight was canceled on direct orders by radio from Secretary of Defense McNamara, who ordered a 90-minute delay before any further flights. When the second flight took off at 1550[B] (having waited 90 minutes as ordered) Geis notified McNamara, who again ordered the recall of the flights. Any officer who doubts the wisdom of an order he has received has the prerogative to ask that the order be confirmed by a yet-higher officer, and Geis availed himself of that right. Since he was questioning the order of the Secretary of Defense, the only man superior to the Secretary was the President. President Johnson himself came on the radio and ordered Geis to recall the flights because 'we are not going to embarrass an ally.'³⁵

The second flights returned to the carriers decks minutes later, after the recall by the President at 1552B.³⁶

Assault Helicopters, Naval Attaché Visit; Rendezvous

In the interim between the first and second rescue flights (at about 1515B) the Israeli torpedo boats and assault helicopters had departed the LIBERTY's area. However, by 1632B the torpedo boats and a flight of Israeli jets returned. The aircraft made a single pass and then returned toward Israel, while the torpedo boats offered assistance, which LIBERTY refused.³⁷ Also, the Israelis had called CDR Ernest Castle, the U.S. Naval Attaché, to the Israeli Foreign Office to report the mistaken attack, which CDR Castle turned around in a message by 1614B.³⁸ He then rode in a helicopter out to the LIBERTY arriving at about 1841B.³⁹ CDR Castle was wearing civilian clothes and Captain McGonagle was in no mood to entertain visitors. He refused permission for the helicopter to land.⁴⁰

The LIBERTY sailed north through the night, and was met at midnight by Soviet guided missile destroyer 626. The Soviet destroyer offered assistance, and shadowed the LIBERTY until the morning, when first USS DAVIS (DD-937) and USS MASSEY joined LIBERTY, followed a few hours later by USS AMERICA, USS SARATOGA, and USS LITTLE ROCK, the Sixth Fleet flagship. The wounded were evacuated to the AMERICA, and two of the more seriously wounded were further transported to the Naval Hospital in Naples. "Four men with brain injuries were sent to an Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany..."⁴¹ The LIBERTY steamed into Malta on Wednesday, June 14th, six days after the attack and four days after the cease-fire that ended the Six-Day War. In Malta, the LIBERTY was placed in a drydock to effect voyage repairs.



Figure 3 View of torpedo hole below waterline.⁴²

Notes

¹ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 3.

² James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 17, 29.

³ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty'," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 63.

⁴ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 20. TRSSCOM, Technical Research Ship Special Communications System, operated by bouncing a 10kWatt microwave signal from a large transmitting antennae on the ship, off the moon, to a receiving antennae in Cheltenham, MD. The system worked only when both stations were in view of the moon. The antennae size exceeded the capacity of the supporting hydraulic system.

⁵ James Bamford, *The Puzzle Palace: Inside the National Security Agency, America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 273-293. Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 212. James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New

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York: Random House, 1979), 130. John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 58. Borne cites Phil Goulding's comments about the attack on LIBERTY. Goulding was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs at the time, and wrote a book that described the internal DoD debate on how to portray USS LIBERTY's mission, since a strong argument was made to admit the LIBERTY's intelligence collection function. The book is *Confirm or Deny*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 101.

⁶ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 12-13.

⁷ James Bamford, *The Puzzle Palace: Inside the National Security Agency, America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 282.

⁸ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 37-38; John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 21.

⁹ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 45-46. John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 24.

¹⁰ USS LIBERTY Memorial Web Site, located at <http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/>.

¹¹ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 24, 238.

¹² Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 225. Green's normally detailed account is lacking a source for this information. None of the eyewitness account sources mention this reconnaissance, or how the Israelis knew the LIBERTY was heading for the Levant.

¹³ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 46-48, 56-57. John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 24-25.

¹⁴ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 23.

¹⁵ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 226.

¹⁶ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty,'" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 62.

¹⁷ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 26-27.

¹⁸ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 26-27.

¹⁹ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 29.

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²⁰ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 61-81. John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 29-38. Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty'," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 66-67. Walter L. Jacobsen, "A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the Liberty," *Naval Law Review* 36, (Winter 1986), 11-13. Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 228-233. These sources all discuss the air attack, and provide the information used to synopsise the air attack.

²¹ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 30.

²² Walter L. Jacobsen, "A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the Liberty," *Naval Law Review* 36, (Winter 1986), 12-13.

²³ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 32.

²⁴ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 74-75; John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 32.

²⁵ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 33-35.

²⁶ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty,'" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 67; James Bamford, *The Puzzle Palace: Inside the National Security Agency, America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 291-292. Bamford says the torpedo hit between frames 53 and 66, the number two hold, instead of the number three hold cited by Smith.

²⁷ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 35.

²⁸ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty,'" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 67.

²⁹ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty,'" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 67-68.

³⁰ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 35-36; James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 92-96.

³¹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 231. Green goes on to say, "This message, COMSIXTHFLT 081305Z, was not received by the Liberty, as she temporarily had no electricity and was off the air at the time."

³² USS LIBERTY Memorial Web Site, located at <http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/>.

³³ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 96; John W. R.

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Taylor, ed., *Jane's All the World's Aircraft 1969-70*, (London: Haymarket Publishing Group, 1970), 80-81.

³⁴ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 39-40.

³⁵ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 40. Borne goes on, "This information was confirmed to Ennes in part by Chief Petty Officer Julian Hart of the U.S. Naval Station in Morocco, who relayed the calls from Washington to the Sixth Fleet and overheard part of the calls. He confirms McNamara spoke to Geis, but he did not overhear the President."

³⁶ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 41.

³⁷ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 36.

³⁸ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 99.

³⁹ Richard K. Smith, "The Violation of the 'Liberty,'" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (June 1978), 68.

⁴⁰ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 105-106.

⁴¹ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 135.

⁴² USS LIBERTY Memorial Web Site, located at <http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/>.

Chapter 3

Why Attack the LIBERTY?

Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.

—Sir Winston Churchill
First Statement as Prime Minister
House of Commons, May 13, 1940

Survival Interest

Since 1948 Israel faced a dramatic threat to her very survival. All her Arab neighbors were bent on Israel's destruction. From about 1955 they received armaments from the Soviet Union.¹ They did nothing to prevent terrorist incursions into Israeli territory.² Syria had attempted diversion of Jordan River headwaters to irrigation projects, affecting Israel's water supply. Although Israel had thwarted the irrigation diversion, future access to Jordan River waters was in jeopardy.³ Egypt had restricted the use of the Suez Canal for goods en route to or from Israel.⁴ The Arabs created a joint military command determined to cooperate in the destruction of Israel.⁵ Then in May 1967 Egypt sent an armored force with an estimated 1,000 tanks and 100,000 troops to the Sinai and Egyptian-Israeli border, and threatened to close the Strait of Tiran. Israel could not afford to stand by and wait while the Arabs inexorably took step after step after step in the process of destroying Israel. To do so would have been irrational.

U.S. Foreign Policy Shift

President Johnson's foreign policy toward the Middle East had taken a remarkable pro-Israel turn in 1964, reversing the more balanced approach of all his predecessors.

When Johnson took office the Israeli press was very hopeful for a president that was

more responsive than his predecessor to appeals from sympathizers of Israel in the U.S., particularly now, with the 1964 elections approaching; HERUT and HABOKER [major Israeli dailies] called for stepped-up efforts to mobilize these sympathizers.⁶

There was also the impression in Israel that the State Department contained an anti-Israeli bias, but that hopefully Johnson would be approachable directly. However, the fear of bias may have been unfounded, or direct approach was possible, because a change did occur. The Arabs noticed a change in policy as early as March 1964 – the CIA station in Cairo, Egypt reported that “Nasser had informed Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot that ‘the U.S. had shifted its policy into more active support of Israel.’”⁷ The changes manifested themselves as both larger amounts of assistance, and larger percentages comprising military assistance.

U.S. government assistance to Israel in FY 1964, the last budget year of the Kennedy administration, stood at \$40 million. This was substantially reduced from the levels of assistance in previous years. In FY 1965, this figure rose to \$71 million, and in FY 1966, to \$130 million. More significant, however, was the change in the composition of that assistance. In FY 1964, virtually none of the official U.S. assistance for Israel was military assistance; it was split almost equally between development loans and food assistance under the PL480 program. In FY 1965, however, 20 percent of the U.S. aid was military in nature, and in FY 1966, fully 71 percent of all official assistance to Israel came in the form of credits for purchase of military equipment.⁸

Such a shift could hardly be surprising in view of the Soviet support to her Arab clients. However, seeing that Johnson was more amenable to Israel's equipment desires, the Israelis pressed to receive newer and more modern equipment. During FY 1965-

1966, Israel received “250 modern (modified M-48) tanks, 48 A-1 Skyhawk attack aircraft, communications and electronics equipment, artillery, and recoilless rifles.”⁹ And in June 1965, Israeli ambassador to the U.S. asked for authorization to purchase the F-4 Phantom. The F-4 was "superior at the time to anything the Russians had, let alone anything they had supplied to the Arabs. The F-4 had been operational for less than a year at the time of the request, and would in 1965 have constituted a quantum escalation of the Middle East arms race."¹⁰ The effect of the equipment sales may have been good for arms manufacturers in the U.S.,¹¹ but it left no doubt in Arab minds about whose side the U.S. was on. The balance of power strategy had been replaced with a preponderance of power strategy.

However, preponderance of power was exactly what Israel required if she were to improve her dire security situation. Most distressing after the 1948 and 1956 wars was the continued existence of lengthy and indefensible borders. The failure to secure peace or even to be able to negotiate with any of the Arab states left Israel little choice in achieving long-term solutions to the security dilemma. In the absence of negotiated settlement, Israel would at least need a defensible territory.

The immediate events leading up to the Six-Day War, in addition to the establishment of the joint military command, movement of troops up to the Egypt-Israel border, the blockade of the Strait of Tiran, and increased belligerence in statements by Nasser included the addition of Jordan to the UAR joint military command on May 30th.¹²

Trevor Dupuy’s observation is particularly salient in the face of these facts:

The blockade of the Strait of Tiran, like the continuing denial of Israeli passage through the Suez, was justifiable under international law only on the basis of Egyptian insistence that there was a continuing state of war with Israel. Thus, if a war already existed, Egypt could not logically

accuse Israel of starting a war by its attack on June 5. As in 1956, Egypt was claiming the rights of belligerency but did not want to incur the risks or liabilities of the belligerency.¹³

Don't Shoot First

Yet, in late May 1967, President Johnson qualified U.S. policy toward Israel. Israel was not to be the aggressor, lest she find herself isolated in the world community. This presented a problem for Israel. As long as Israel was defending itself (indeed, was in a state of war with Egypt), it could count on Johnson's support. However, to wait for an attack decreased Israel's chance to achieve security (territorial) objectives while significantly increasing military risk. On the other hand, if Israel were the aggressor, then Israel would have to "go it alone."¹⁴ This effectively put Israel in the unenviable position of waiting to be attacked, being forced to react to Arab initiative, and risking the very survival of the state (not to mention violate all the principles of war.)

U.S. as Strategy Instrument

What Israel really wanted and needed from the U.S. was two things. First, the U.S. had to prevent Soviet interference in the fighting, so that Israel could press the military advantage and achieve her military and strategic objectives. The request to that effect came on June 5th, in a message from Prime Minister Eshkol to President Johnson asking for protection if the Soviets intervened. Second, the U.S. needed to prevent the U.N. from demanding a premature cease-fire before Israeli military and strategic objectives were met. The U.S. during Security Council deliberations 'resisted' wording of a cease-fire resolution that labeled Israel as the aggressor or demanded a troop withdrawal to the previous boundaries. Rather than a troop withdrawal, the U.S. position was to urge for a negotiation of the basic political disagreement. Two days, June 5th and June 6th were

spent arguing these points, with the Soviet Union giving in late on June 6th. The Arabs, unhappy with the resolution, took time to accept the cease-fire agreement. Jordan accepted first, on June 7th, and the United Arab Republic on June 8th.¹⁵

Pushed into a corner and already in a state of war with Egypt, Israel initiated a blitzkrieg on Monday, June 5th that masterfully eliminated the Egyptian and then the Jordanian and Syrian Air Forces from contending for the skies. Israeli ground and air forces were then free to annihilate Egyptian armored forces deployed to the Sinai. This was effectively accomplished by June 8th. It may have been Johnson's admonition concerning Israeli aggression that precipitated the announcement at the start of the Israeli blitz over Israeli radio, "that Egyptian armoured forces had moved at dawn towards the Negev and that radar had detected numerous Egyptian aircraft approaching Israel. This was not true, but it alerted the civilian population to the fact that war had started."¹⁶

Cease-fire Considerations

By June 8th the Sinai had been taken, Jerusalem was in Israeli hands, and the West Bank had been occupied. Jordan and Egypt had accepted a cease-fire. The Golan Heights represented a unique problem for Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and the Israeli government. If Israel had initiated an offensive against Syria and was initially successful then Syria could accept the U.N. cease-fire prior to Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. On the other hand, if Israel waited for Syria to accept the cease-fire, and then the cease-fire was broken, another cease-fire would take two to three days to arrange. That would provide the needed time for Israel to take the Golan Heights.¹⁷ There were also operational and tactical reasons to delay the attack on the Golan. Primary was the need to rest the troops that were to reinforce the attacking force, coming from the West

Bank. The reinforcements would be critical to the speed with which the Heights could be taken, and it was important to take enough territory before another cease-fire became unavoidable. Additionally, the Syrian defenses were so well fortified that the Golan Heights resembled a mini-Maginot line. Dayan wanted time to soften up and demoralize the defenses by pounding them with air power without ceasing, including at night.¹⁸

The Golan Heights were critical to Israel's future. They overlooked the finest agricultural land in Israel, and the years of constant Syrian harassment had made it difficult to cultivate that area. Syrian artillery was able to threaten the entire valley to the west. Israeli control of the heights would have also prevented future Syrian manipulation of the Jordan River watershed. And Al Fatah raids from Syria necessarily passed through the Golan on their way to Israel. There was no doubt of the importance of the Golan Heights to Israel.

The problem for Israel is that they could not be detected or perceived as violating the June 8th cease-fire, because then they would be pressured to return the Golan Heights to Syria. The Israelis, and Moshe Dayan, had not commenced a Syrian front earlier because of potential international consequences.¹⁹ In fact, on the morning of June 8th there was a particularly heavy exchange of artillery fire between Israel and Syria, which was reported by the U.S. Consul General to the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. Rusk shot back an angry communiqué ordering the Consul General to

approach the Israeli Foreign Ministry at highest level to express deep concern this new indication military action by [government of Israel]. If reported bombardment correct, we would assume it prelude to military action against Syrian positions on Syrian soil. Such a development, following on heels Israeli acceptance [Security Council] cease-fire resolution would cast doubts on Israeli intentions and create grave problems for [U.S. government] representatives in Arab countries. You should stress we must at all costs have complete cessation Israeli military

action except in cases where clearly some replying fire is necessary in self-defense.²⁰

Clearly the U.S. was pressuring Israel not to attack Syria, and preservation of some semblance of relations with other Arab nations was of some interest to Rusk. However, Ambassador Barbour “responded that Syrian shelling from the heights had been ‘continuous and incessant’ and ... as of 9:45 P.M. [2145B June 8th] local time, had not accepted the U.N. cease-fire.”²¹ The Syrians finally did accept the cease-fire at 5:20 A.M. (0520B) on 09 June.²² In the aftermath of the war there was much controversy concerning the initiation of fighting on the Golan Heights following Syria’s acceptance of the cease-fire. Authors Randolph and Winston Churchill comment in their 1967 book about the Six-Day War that no one could really tell for sure who violated the cease fire.²³ However, Moshe Dayan unabashedly claimed in his memoir that Israel violated the cease-fire when he ordered General Elazar, the Israeli Northern Commander, to attack the Golan Heights when he had the forces he needed in place.²⁴ The attack commenced at 1130B.²⁵

Unfortunately, USS LIBERTY's presence directly threatened Israel's Golan Heights objective. The reason was

The Israelis knew well that close in, the Liberty could intercept tactical communications, such as:

Messages to and from the brigade and division headquarters of IDF units still fighting in Jerusalem and the West Bank in violation of a UN cease-fire that had just gone into effect.

Movement orders for units that, on the evening-morning of June 7-8, were being rushed from the Sinai and Jordanian fronts to the northern Galilee border with Syria, in preparation for an invasion...²⁶

Moreover, the troublesome TRSSCOM had finally started working on June 8th just before the attack on the LIBERTY.²⁷ And, “The attack on the Liberty had primarily

military motives – to prevent surveillance of Israeli military activities – although it could have been intended to send a strong coercive signal to the United States not to restrain Israel from achieving its territorial objectives.”²⁸ The operative question was, could LIBERTY have been perceived by the Israelis to have the capability to capture an intent to violate the cease-fire and take what was then called the Syrian Heights? The above suggests yes.

Notes

¹ Nadav Safran, “The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective,” *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 361-362.

² Charles W. Yost, “How It Began,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 304, 318.

³ Nadav Safran, “The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective,” *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 330; Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 191.

⁴ Nadav Safran, “The Arab-Israeli Dispute in Perspective,” *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967): 361.

⁵ Charles W. Yost, “How It Began,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, (January 1968), 305.

⁶ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 185.

⁷ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 185-186. Green notes the cable was unclassified, dated March 5, 1964, and was in the Carrolton Press Declassified Reference System, 1976, 12B.

⁸ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 186.

⁹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 187.

¹⁰ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America’s Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 194.

¹¹ Edgar O’Balance, *The Third Arab-Israeli War*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972), 45. Israeli M-48s were discarded from West Germany, which was upgrading to M-60 tanks. West Germany refused to deal directly with Israel, so the U.S. played middleman. In other instances, West German reparations payments, which Israel used to buy French equipment, went straight to France without ever getting to Israel.

¹² Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 228-229.

¹³ Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 230.

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¹⁴ Harry N. Howard, "The U.S. in the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, No. 316 (December 1967), 339.

¹⁵ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 200-202.

¹⁶ Edgar O'Balance, *The Third Arab-Israeli War*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972), 64.

¹⁷ Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 183; Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 320-321.

¹⁸ Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 182-183; Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 320-321.

¹⁹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 222.

²⁰ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 223

²¹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 223.

²² Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 223. Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 183.

²³ Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 185.

²⁴ Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 321.

²⁵ Randolph S. Churchill and Winston S. Churchill, *The Six Day War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 185.

²⁶ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 225.

²⁷ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 72.

²⁸ Lieutenant Commander Joseph F. Bouchard, USN, "Accidents and Crises: Panay, Liberty, and Stark," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1988, 98.

Chapter 4

Reaction to the Attack on USS LIBERTY

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

--Edmund Burke
Speech to the Electors of Bristol
November 3, 1774

Foreign Policy Errors

Recall of the flights sent to aid and succor the LIBERTY was a huge error on the part of the United States, President Johnson, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. There really was nothing to lose and everything to gain in responding to the attack. For instance,

suppose that the first flight had gone ahead, reaching the ship and sinking the Israeli torpedo boats. Certainly this defense of an American ship against any attacker would have been approved by a majority of the American people. It would not have affected the Israeli victory over Egypt and Jordan; this would still have been a fact despite this clash with the United States. The fear of offending Israel should not have been a factor; to what other nation could Israel possibly turn for diplomatic and financial support? Johnson would have demonstrated his determination to protect American ships and men under all circumstances, and after a minor furor the matter would have been forgotten.¹

Unfortunately, with a 1424B launch of the first flight, the air attack on LIBERTY was just being completed and the torpedo hit was about ten minutes away. The aircraft

would not have made it to the LIBERTY in time prevent the torpedo attack, but could have arrived in the area by 1455B and caught the torpedo boats while they were still firing at the waterline and then the life rafts.² The torpedo boats did not depart the scene until 1515B.

Supposing the first rescue flight were not recalled, the possible outcomes once the aircraft arrived on scene ranged from benign to very dangerous. Assuming an arrival to LIBERTY at approximately 1450B, the aircraft would have found torpedo boats still firing 20mm and 40mm guns at the ships waterline, and preventing ship's fire parties from fighting fires topside. If the flights had enough fuel to remain on station, they would have encountered the troop transport helicopters with their jet escorts. The range of possible outcomes varies from all Israeli aircraft and shipping being shot down or sunk, to the downing of all U.S. protecting aircraft. Speculating on the dynamics of some of these outcomes 30 years after the decision is fraught with uncertainty, but could be sure to have been politically charged in Israel, and perhaps threaten an Israeli coalition that had only been preserved when Moshe Dayan acquired the Defense portfolio on June 1st.³ In the U.S., presumably public opinion would have initially supported rescue flights just as public opinion normally does, and then a real investigation into the attack of LIBERTY might have been performed.

Allowing the initial response flights to come to the aid of LIBERTY might have had another practical political effect: it might have given the United States additional leverage to prevent an Israeli attack on Syria. Why? As Walter Jacobsen points out in his "Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the USS Liberty", the

attack was not legally justified and constituted an act of aggression under the United Nations Charter. The attack itself identified two further

violations of international law. First, the use of unmarked military aircraft, contrary to the customary international law of air warfare. Second, the wanton destruction and seizure of life rafts being put over the side by Liberty crewmen. To speculate on the motives of an attack group that uses unmarked planes and deprives helpless survivors of life rafts raises disturbing possibilities, including the one that the Liberty crew was not meant to survive the attack, and would not have, but for the incorrect 6th Fleet radio broadcast that help was on the way – which had the effect of chasing off the MTBs.⁴

The USS LIBERTY was “an electronic intelligence-gathering ship . . . in international waters off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula listening to the events of the Six-Day War, then nearly finished. The Government of the United States, as a nominally neutral nation, was legally entitled to conduct this activity, since intelligence gathering on the high seas is lawful.”⁵ Hence, the Israeli attack was illegal, and was conducted with malicious intent. For these reasons not only do I believe a rescue flight would have precipitated a full investigation of the matter, but exposure of these circumstances could have been used to influence Israel’s actions on June 9th and 10th, had Johnson wished to do so.

Other U.S. Considerations

Of some interest was the wish by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to conduct a retaliatory strike on Israel. The analysis of Patrick McGarvey, “a CIA analyst assigned to the JCS [at the time] states that the attack on the ship was

An incident which could have sucked the United States into that war had the Joint Chief of Staff’s impulsive advice, which I witnessed, been followed. They proposed a quick retaliatory strike on the Israeli naval base which launched the attack.⁶

The recommendation apparently was mostly due to the regret felt by senior military officers over the presidential recall of the rescue flights.⁷ It seems rash to assume that a retaliatory strike on Ashdod would really embroil the U.S. into the war, since an Israeli

military reaction to a retaliatory strike would have been disastrous for U.S.-Israeli relations - akin to killing the goose that laid the golden egg. In light of the Syrian offensive, it would also have been counterproductive to the main effort against the Golan Heights. However, besides McGarvey's book, there is no evidence the U.S. ever considered a retaliatory strike.

In trying to explain why Johnson did not want to "embarrass an ally," another possibility presents itself. Johnson might have wanted to avoid provoking Soviet entrance into the war with action on the part of U.S. military forces. Unfortunately, such a possibility is far fetched, because Johnson was keeping Soviet Premier Kosygin informed of the status of LIBERTY and U.S. response via the 'hotline'.⁸ Additionally, Sixth Fleet forces reportedly moved to the Eastern Mediterranean late in the week (on June 10th) in order to show U.S. resolve in the face of Soviet Navy action. The move was in response to a 'hotline' message from Kosygin that the Israelis had gone too far in invading Syria, and that the USSR was going to have to take direct action. The intent of the move of the Sixth Fleet was to prevent superpower intervention in the war.⁹ Thus, from the events themselves, it is clear that movement of a preponderance of force (two CVBGs) was an inhibitor of direct Soviet action, as was the coordination of the second cease-fire. The thought that a U.S. rescue flight, which the Soviets knew to be taking place from 'hotline' communications, could have introduced Soviet military action into the Six-Day War has no logical foundation.

All this leads to the enigma wrapped into the Johnson comment we did not want to "embarrass an ally." The reaction is unfathomable in view of the event, U.S. interests, and prudent U.S. foreign policy. No credible explanation has really ever been

documented that explains this sentiment. Domestic politics or personal reasons are the logical motivators that could have instigated this response, since U.S. interests, foreign policy, or a legal view of the attack were not. In the domestic political arena, there were signs that Johnson had received considerable pressure to actively keep the plight of Israel in the forefront of decision making regarding Middle Eastern policy.

Speechwriters Ben Wattenberg and Larry Levinson sent a memo to Johnson on June 7 urging him to make a statement strongly supporting Israel to "neutralize" the McCloskey statement. (Robert McCloskey of the State Dept. said in a press conference on June 5 that the U.S. was 'neutral in thought, word and deed.') Johnson spotted Levinson in the hall shortly afterward and yelled at him, 'You and Wattenberg are Zionist dupes in the White House! Why can't you see that I'm doing all I can for Israel.' Johnson stormed away and Levinson was 'shaken to the marrow of my bones,' as he later said.¹⁰

In fact, it seems personal politics were really never far from Johnson's mind. For instance, just prior to the 1106-1145R meeting of the NSC in the White House Situation Room on June 8th, where the NSC would discuss the attack on the LIBERTY, Johnson told his secretary to "Get me in 20 minutes how many states I have been in since I became president." The answer came in fifteen minutes; he visited 46 states.¹¹ Another factor that might have played with Johnson is the fact that the U.S. had been warned to move LIBERTY the night before, and the military had failed to get it done. In a perverse sort of way, and without taking into consideration the attack's legal aspects or U.S. foreign policy interests, Johnson might have thought the LIBERTY *deserved* to be attacked because the LIBERTY was to be repositioned. The LIBERTY incident would be a terrible travesty if that reasoning were the case.

Consequences of Limited Scope Inquiry

The recall of the rescue flights was a bad enough mistake for the U.S. government, but insult was to be added to injury. The Naval Court of Inquiry, presided over by Admiral Kidd, was limited in scope to just circumstances directly involved with ship's training and response to the attack. Consequently, details of the attack directed toward items such as the deliberateness of the action, or the intensity of the attack, or the attack duration were not directly in executive summary. Some of those details were in the 700 or so pages of the formerly classified enclosures, while some evidence, such as a vial of unburned napalm, were not admitted.¹² Admiral Kidd was not happy with the restrictions placed on him. He "returned to Norfolk after the hearing 'very angry about the restrictions he had to operate under and about not being able to release the whole story.'"¹³

The cover up of the attack was not in the U.S. interest. By limiting the scope of the fact finding investigation, the Naval Court of Inquiry missed the opportunity to accurately portray what had happened, in the spirit in which the event happened. A more comprehensive investigation with less classification would have highlighted the illegal aggression of the attack, and could have pressured Israel for improved performance in paying damages for the attack. For instance, Israel promised on June 12th to pay compensation, but then tried to deduct the amount the U.S. government would pay from the bill to the Israelis. "The State Department firmly rejected the Israeli argument:

We think this proposal entirely misconceives the legal situation. The payments provided for in United States legislation are in no way related to liability of another government under international law to pay compensation for wrongful death.¹⁴

Israel paid \$3,323,500, the full bill, in June of 1968, compensating for those that died in the attack. The compensation for the wounded took longer, and Israel paid \$3,566,457 on April 28, 1969, after hiring a team of lawyers to verify the claims. Finally, Israel was assessed \$7,644,146 by the U.S. for the value of the LIBERTY itself, based on the cost of a ship of comparable age and size. After twelve years arguing, Israel paid \$6 million for the ship in December of 1980.¹⁵

A full inquiry also missed the chance to fully investigate the legality of the attack, and perhaps seek redress under international law. Additionally, a U.S. inquiry may have pressured Israel to conduct a full and comprehensive inquiry, and to make it available to the U.S. government. In general the Israeli accounts are very unsatisfying. They lack the detail of the accounts of the LIBERTY survivors, they contradict each other and the LIBERTY accounts at key points, and they lack any documentation to enhance their credibility. A comprehensive examination of the evidence would have revealed the attack to have been deliberate and sustained, which would have presented a problem for Israel, but not necessarily for the U.S.

The U.S. interest in the Middle East was in seeing a peace established. The U.S. could have gauged its response to the results of an inquiry accordingly. Just because the attack on LIBERTY was unjust did not lessen the necessity for Israel to have security; there would not have been a need to insist Israel return occupied territories, although that could have been implied had cooperation with the investigation on the part of Israel failed. Again, the chance to use the incident to the advantage of the U.S. seemed to be completely subordinated to the interests of Israel.¹⁶

Likewise, a full inquiry would not have been bound to draw attention to the Golan Heights issue, nor would the two have necessarily been linked. Such supposition on the part of an investigative panel would have been pure speculation, and again, U.S. handling of the invasion of Syria within the context of an investigation could have been made completely dependent on Israel. For instance, Israel had been less than forthcoming on the issue of how much money Israel was spending on French arms. The issue was pertinent because the French only sold arms on a cash basis, while the U.S. often supplied loans for the purpose of arms purchases. The Israelis were cash strapped, so if Israel could buy using U.S. arms loans, they could avoid making unnecessary cash purchases from the French. The State Department wanted to know this information so that they could make appropriate loan-level recommendations.¹⁷

Could the Attack on LIBERTY have been Accidental

What does it take to be an accident? The American Heritage Dictionary defines an accident as "an unexpected, undesirable event; an unforeseen incident."¹⁸ Elements include a lack of intention, an event rising from carelessness or ignorance, and not due to any fault or misconduct on the part of the person. Using these criteria, the attack on the LIBERTY could not be considered an accident. The attack was planned in advance, included a warning to the U.S. government to move the ship,¹⁹ and included extensive reconnaissance in which the ship was positively identified. The LIBERTY had freshly painted identifying letters on the bow, and clearly identifiable name on the stern. The U.S. flag was flying during all the reconnaissance flights, most of the air attack and during the motor torpedo boat attacks. The overall attack was executed with precision (with the exception of the torpedo attacks), and was shown to be a well-coordinated effort

to first disable the ship's ability to communicate, and then to sink the ship. The ship's radio circuits were jammed for the duration of the air attack, except during the rocket attacks. There is no reason to believe that the jamming would have not continued through the rocket attacks if the systems had allowed.

Additionally some of the Israeli versions of the attack claim the LIBERTY was mistaken for the Egyptian motor vessel, El Quesir. The two vessels were not similar. The key silhouette features that distinguished one from the other include the antennae arrays and the differing superstructures. LIBERTY was approximately twice the length of El Quesir. The Israelis probably knew that El Quesir was in Alexandria during the entire Six-Day War. Alexandria is 250 miles from where LIBERTY was patrolling, 24 hours steam away.²⁰ Comparison may be made below.



Figure 4 USS LIBERTY silhouette.²¹



Figure 5 El Quesir silhouette²²

Conclusion

The attack on the USS LIBERTY should have put U.S. foreign policy with Israel in relief, but instead somehow the situation was obscured with faulty lenses. Instead of a policy that put U.S. interests first, the president subordinated our interests to those of another nation, albeit an ally. And while Johnson and McNamara were right in the assessment of Soviet aims in the Middle East, those aims still did not erase U.S. interests. Validation of Johnson and McNamara's viewpoint was received very shortly after the Six-Day War, when the Soviet Union, through her satellite nations, began to resupply aircraft to Egypt.²³ However, Johnson and McNamara's correct reading of the Soviet aims in the Middle East does not eradicate the blame for mishandling Israel during this incident. Those that argue that the above is irrelevant because there will never again be another Johnson or McNamara can not be sure that inexperience or distraction won't inhibit good judgment in future political leadership. That is why it will be incumbent on all military professionals to understand our intertwined strategic environment, so that we don't wander into the next war zone under false pretenses.

The aftermath of the attack on the LIBERTY offers operational and tactical lessons to all U.S. armed forces. Because the incident could have been prevented if the LIBERTY had received her message traffic, the first lesson is a well-worn one in that robust communications remain of utmost importance. As DoD moves to an era of virtual communicating, the need to ensure the efficacy of communications is paramount. The nation can't afford communications breakdown of the LIBERTY type for any of its operating military units.

Perhaps more difficult than a communications lesson is one in which force commanders must be keenly aware of when the U.S. and a friendly nation's interests collide. This must be communicated throughout the headquarters, so that duty officers understand the big picture and can respond to urgent situations appropriately. An appreciation of foreign nation interests and the application of strength to strength will enable operational employment that avoids problems like LIBERTY: unarmed, in a war zone, and without protection. The Captain and crew were expert enough to drill hard on damage control, and it probably saved the ship. Sending the LIBERTY an escort might have saved considerably more.

Many questions about the LIBERTY incident remain unknown. Although many of the details of what happened are known, the answers to why this attack happened cannot be answered with certainty. The deliberateness of the attack is clear, yet there are still those that don't accept the evidence. And the questions about why U.S. policy went awry have not been satisfactorily answered. A full inquiry would make this evidence known.

Finally, although beyond the scope of this paper, there is a need for follow-on research regarding the structure of the various Israeli explanations for the attack compared with the availability of U.S. public data regarding the incident. The hypothesis would be that Israeli explanations for the attack were more likely to change to accommodate and include new information on the incident, as it became available in the U.S. The purpose of the follow-on project would be to determine if explanations were created to explain the incident as accidental, yet still include enough real details to retain semblance of credibility. It would be expected that a positive correlation of explanations to timing of new public information regarding the LIBERTY would help confirm the

hypothesis and show a deception and disinformation effort to obscure the facts surrounding the attack on the LIBERTY.

Notes

¹ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 288.

² John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 39.

³ Edgar O'Balance, *The Third Arab-Israeli War*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972), 33-34.

⁴ Walter L. Jacobsen, "A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the Liberty," *Naval Law Review* 36, (Winter 1986), 51.

⁵ Walter L. Jacobsen, "A Juridical Examination of the Israeli Attack on the Liberty," *Naval Law Review* 36, (Winter 1986), 51.

⁶ Patrick J. McGarvey, *CIA: The Myth & the Madness*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 17, as cited by John Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 56.

⁷ *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 56. The un-named head of one of the U.S. intelligence agencies told this to former representative and current attorney pro bono for the LIBERTY Veterans Association Paul McCloskey.

⁸ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 42. These communications were inaccurate, since they asserted that rescue flights were on their way to LIBERTY, flights that had been recalled.

⁹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 200-201.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 205, as cited by John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 239.

¹¹ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979) 98-99, John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 47-48.

¹² James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979) 144-164.

¹³ Letter, Richard Lee to James Ennes, January 21, 1974, from Ennes collection, as cited by John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 47-48

¹⁴ Department of State Memo, from Meeker to Katzenbach, May 17, 1968. Liberty File, LBJ Library, as cited by John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 119.

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¹⁵ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 118-124.

¹⁶ John E. Borne, *The USS LIBERTY: Dissenting History vs. Official History*, (New York: Reconsideration Press, 1995), 287.

¹⁷ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 187.

¹⁸ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992), 11.

¹⁹ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 238.

²⁰ James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship*, (New York: Random House, 1979) 154.

²¹ USS LIBERTY Memorial Web Site, located at <http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/>.

²² USS LIBERTY Memorial Web Site, located at <http://www.halcyon.com/jim/ussliberty/>.

²³ "Massive Resupply Narrows Israeli Margin," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 86 (Jun 19, 1967), 16-19.

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